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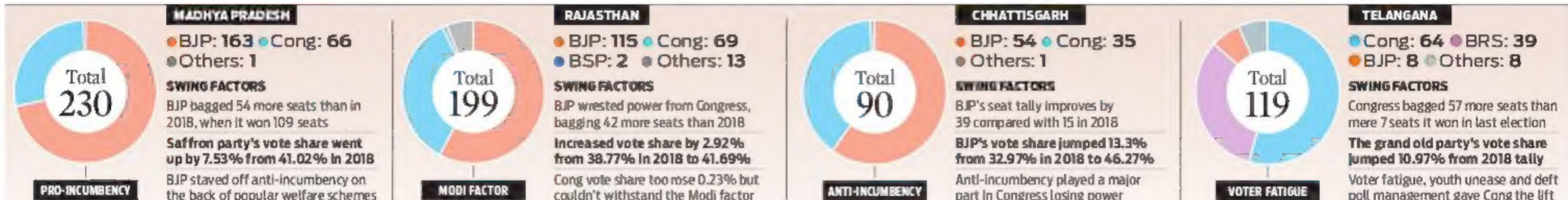


Illustration: Soumyadip Sinha

BIG BJP BOUNCE CONG GETS CONSOLATION PRIZE

● SAFFRON PARTY RETAINS MP, WRESTS CHHATTISGARH, RAJASTHAN ● CONGRESS TROUNCES BRS IN TELANGANA ● MODI SAYS HAT-TRICK A WARNING TO THE CORRUPT

RAJESH KUMAR THAKUR
@ New Delhi

IN what was billed as the semi-final to the 2024 bout, the BJP scored a resounding victory in three out of four states where votes were counted on Sunday. That they were big Hindi heartland states added to the quality of the triumph.

Beating anti-incumbency, the party retained power in Madhya Pradesh for the fifth consecutive time while wresting power in Rajasthan and Chhattisgarh. In all three states, the BJP was locked in a straight fight with the Congress, giving it the lift ahead of the Lok Sabha battle.

Telangana was the outlier as it gave the Congress a thumping mandate, refusing to accord the Bharat Rashtra Samithi a third consecutive shot at power. The Congress was widely expected to retain Chhattisgarh but it inexplicably faltered.

In Madhya Pradesh, the BJP managed to hold on to power.



BJP workers celebrate the party's performance, in Jabalpur on Sunday | AP

Its welfare schemes like the CM's Ladli Behna Yojana for women empowerment was a big draw. Yet, the party didn't project Shivraj Singh Chouhan as its face, seeking votes in the name of Prime Minister Narendra Modi instead. Modi, too, sought votes for himself in all four states, a strategy to overcome voter fatigue.

Of course, the BJP electoral machine's booth management skills, astute ticket distribution and the over confidence of the Congress swung the popular mood in its favour in

Madhya Pradesh.

The Opposition's guarantees like reviving the old pension scheme, caste census and other freebies couldn't score over Modi's guarantee of ushering in a Viksit Bharat (developed India) in all the three states. Announcing the extension of the free ration scheme to 80 crore poor people for five years after the model code of conduct had kicked in, the annual ₹6,000 dole to farmers and the passage of the women's reservation

bill in Parliament drew women to polling booths in droves.

The BJP won two-thirds majority in MP and comfortable simple majorities in Rajasthan and Chhattisgarh (see chart). Raids by Central law enforcement agencies against Opposition leaders, accusing them of corruption, smeared their image and acted as a force multiplier for the BJP in Chhattisgarh and Rajasthan.

But Rajasthan chief minister Ashok Gehlot has only himself to blame for his nasty power struggle with Sachin Pilot. In any case, voters in the state prefer alternating power between the Congress and the BJP in the bipolar contest.

Terming the BJP's hat-trick in the state elections as a guarantee for the party's hat-trick in the 2024 Lok Sabha polls, Modi said the results convey a warning to corrupt parties. "The results show popular support for our battle against corruption," he said.



Telangana Congress chief A Revanth Reddy waves the party flag amid a huge crowd of supporters in Hyderabad on Sunday | SRI LOGANATHAN VELMURUGA

CONG TAPPED INTO PUBLIC DISCONTENT WITH KCR IN T'GANA

KALYAN THOLETI @ Hyderabad

THE victory of the Congress in the state brings one thought to mind. It has risen like a phoenix from the ashes. Even late last year, there was a sense of disbelief in Hyderabad when anyone suggested a Congress resurrection. Such was the aura BRS supreme and outgoing chief minister K Chandrashekar Rao had created around himself, ruling with an iron fist. But one had only to step outside Hyderabad to see the reality.

It was evident that many sections were fed up. One word that sums it up is disconnect between the people and KCR with the latter isolating himself in his ivory tower. Farmers who had no crop insurance being denied compensation after unseasonal rains, large-scale failure in delivering 2BHK housing for the poor, nepotism, corruption, perceived discrimination in implementing Dalit Bandhu, irregularities in TSPSC and Dharani portal, and above all, the attitude of BRS MLAs and the chief minister himself led to this disenchantment.

People saw in them arrogance typically associated with rulers. This in turn made them feel as victims — the exact sentiment that had

crystallised into the Telangana movement years earlier. The Congress found a way to tap into this discontent.

The party lost bypolls under Revanth Reddy but the latter was able to voice public opinion strongly and keep the Congress as the default opposition — notwithstanding efforts of the BJP to supplant it. Having done that, he was also able to earn the complete confidence of the Congress high command.

It's not a one-man job though. Strategist Sunil Kanugolu's surveys, choice of candidates, ruthlessly brushing aside oldies, the party high command's success in keeping dissenting leaders on a leash, and finally, an effective poll campaign culminated in the victory.

As for Telangana, the Congress has decided to name its state unit president Revanth Reddy as the next CM, sources said.

Race begins for CM posts, Chauhan may get fifth term

EXPRESS NEW SERVICE
@ New Delhi

AFTER the BJP's resounding victory in Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Chhattisgarh and the maiden victory of the Congress in Telangana, the search for chief ministers has begun. The decision on who will lead the governments will be taken by their respective central leaderships.

Sources said four-time CM of Madhya Pradesh, Shivraj Singh Chauhan, may get a fifth term. His Ladli Behna scheme, under which over one crore women were given ₹1,250 per month, was the game-changer. Besides, the BJP leadership would not like to rock the boat in Madhya Pradesh five months before the all-important Lok Sabha elections.

In Rajasthan, former CM Vasundhara Raje is considered a strong candidate though she is not the central leadership's favourite. Sources said the BJP leadership accepted that the sidelining of B S Yediyurappa was one of the key reasons for its defeat in Karnataka. It, therefore, brought Raje to the forefront after ignoring her for years.

Union ministers Arjun Meghwal and Gajendra Shekhawat are also in the race. But the party may choose Raje for the sake of stability.

The real challenge for the BJP is in Chhattisgarh. It got an overwhelming support of tribals and a fair share of votes of the OBCs. Though former CM Raman Singh led the party to victory, there is talk of a fresh face as the next CM from the tribal or OBC block. Among the front runners are Union minister Renuka Singh, former Union minister Vishnu Deo Sai and former state minister Ramvihar Netam.

Sources in the BJP said the party will definitely have one woman CM.

As for Telangana, the Congress has decided to name its state unit president Revanth Reddy as the next CM, sources said.

Three-piece suite and a glass quarter full | P8

Cong ignored coalition dharma, says INDIA bloc | P9

Rivaj of changingraj makes Gehlot flounder | P10

There is only one person in the hearts of the people, that is Modi. Today's results proved that the days of appeasement and caste politics are over. New India votes on politics of performance

Amit Shah, Union home minister

I am very thankful to the people of Telangana — we will definitely fulfil the promise of making 'Prajalu Telangana'

Rahul Gandhi, Congress leader

It is a people's mandate. We need not (do) a postmortem. The simple point is that they wanted change

Revanth Reddy, Telangana Congress leader

Not saddened over the result, but surely disappointed. We will take this in our stride as a learning and will bounce back

KT Rama Rao, BRS working president

BJP clean sweep in tribal belt gives it surprise mandate in Chhattisgarh

EJAZ KAISER @ Raipur

THE BJP's convincing victory in Chhattisgarh trouncing the incumbent Congress has also dealt a blow to political pundits who predicted a close fight in the state while giving the grand old party a slight edge. The saffron party was trailing in the early hours but as counting progressed, it gained lead in all the five divisions of the state and maintained it throughout.

The Congress's loss was amplified after nine ministers out of the 13-member Bhupesh Baghel cabinet lost. Even Chief Minister Bhupesh Baghel, during the early rounds of counting, was trailing. Finally, he defeated BJP MP and his nephew Vijay Baghel at Patan. Deputy CM T S Singhdeo also lost.

The two tribal-dominated di-



Former BJP CM Raman Singh

visions of Surguja and Bastar, which together have 26 assembly seats, swung to the BJP heavily this time around. They contributed in a big way to the Congress landslide in 2018.

A senior BJP leader told this newspaper that the party's focus was on 3Ls (lead, leaders, Lotus) and consistently harped on 3Ms (Maoists, Mahadev App, Mahtari [women]) targeting the Congress government.

"Ahead of the polls, BJP chalked out a 90-day programme — first 30 days were like a cricket Test match, next 30 a one-day match and the last was aggressively pursued like a 20-20 match. Corruption and scam were major issues against the Congress," the BJP leader added.

However, many factors came together to weaken the Congress's chances including corruption charges. During the campaign, Prime Minister Narendra Modi highlighted the charges against the Congress regime, terming the CMO a 'hub of corruption' and that Baghel was not fit to be in office even for a day. The welfare programmes of the Congress mostly aimed at the rural sector apparently got eclipsed by the bouquet of promises announced in the BJP's manifesto.



Council Chairman Basavaraj Horatti and Assembly Speaker UT Khader in the Council Hall in Suvarna Vidhana Soudha in Belagavi on Sunday | EXPRESS

Session starts today; Relief to DKS, guarantees to be discussed

NAUSHAD BIJAPUR @ Belagavi

THE 10-day winter session of the legislature which gets under way at Suvarna Vidhana Soudha in Belagavi on Monday is expected to witness interesting debates on a series of issues and controversies.

Powered by its win in three states, the opposition BJP is likely to attack the Siddaramaiah government over its guaran-

tee schemes and the recent withdrawal of consent given to the CBI by the state government to probe Deputy Chief Minister DK Shivakumar's disproportionate assets case.

The government, to run the session smoothly, has tried to minimise protests that various organisations had planned in front of Suvarna Vidhana Soudha. "Officials have taken initiatives to resolve problems

of various organisations to stop them from protesting near the Soudha," said Council Chairman Basavaraj Horatti.

At least seven to eight important Bills are expected to be tabled in the session, besides discussions on several important topics, he added. Assembly Speaker UT Khader said the government has made elaborate arrangements to hold the session effectively.

P5

K'taka SSLC and II PUC exam schedule out

BENGALURU: Karnataka School Examination and Assessment Board officially released the timetable for the SSLC and II PUC (Pre-University Course) Annual Examination-1 for the year 2023-24. The Secondary PUC Exam-1, which will be held for 21 days, is scheduled from March 2 to March 22, 2024. Similarly, SSLC exams will begin on March 25, 2024, and conclude on April 6, 2024. P2

TN, Andhra brace for cyclone Michaung

CHENNAI: The Tamil Nadu government on Sunday said all arrangements are in place to handle the situation as cyclonic storm Michaung is likely to intensify and reach north Tamil Nadu coast on Monday before its landfall on Tuesday in south Andhra Pradesh. AP CM YS Jagan Mohan Reddy directed collectors of respective districts to take all possible steps to safeguard lives and properties. P5